

The COMET DART Rider's Guide



EFFECTIVE JULY 2020







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Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990 as a means to protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities. A component of the law requires access to public transit services for eligible individuals. In accordance with federal regulations found at 49 CFR Part 37 Subpart F, ADA complementary transit services (known as ADA paratransit) must be available to individuals who have a

disability that prevents them from using accessible fixed-route services.

The ADA defines a disability as a physical, visual, or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual. Major life activities include caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, and learning.

ADA paratransit service is designed to be “comparable to” the fixed-route bus services in a number of ways. Services are provided during the same days, the same hours, and within the same geographic area. Also, the origins and destinations of bus routes are within corridors with a width of three-quarters (3/4) of a mile on each side of the existing fixed route service.





Section 1: Eligibility and Certification

Eligibility

Individuals interested in paratransit services through The COMET must first be determined eligible for the service using Dial-A-Ride Transit (DART). The eligibility review considers each person's functional ability to use the fixed-route buses. A person's age, the distance to bus stops, weather, and environmental barriers do not, alone, establish eligibility.

The ADA eligibility certification criteria will be based on the following:

- A.** A person with a disability who is unable to navigate the transit system without the assistance of another individual.
- B.** Any individual with a disability who needs the assistance of a wheelchair lift or other boarding assistance device and is able, with such assistance, to board, ride, and disembark from any vehicle which is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities if the individual wants to travel on a route on the system during the hours of operation of the system at a time, or within a reasonable period of such time, when such a vehicle is not being used to provide designated public transportation on the route.
- C.** Any person with a disability who has a specific impairment-related condition, which prevents him/her from traveling to or from a bus stop.

Types of Eligibility

The COMET will assign categories of eligibility based on an individual's functional ability. The types of eligibility for DART are as follows:

Unconditional eligibility

The customer is unable to use the fixed-route service under any conditions. This eligibility is valid for five (5) years from certification.

Conditional eligibility

The customer can use the fixed-route service in specific situations, such as a fixed route with a close and accessible stop. However, if a stop is too far or is inaccessible, this customer may qualify for paratransit. It is important that the conditions of his/her eligibility be clearly defined and understood by both the customer and the reservationists/schedulers and dispatchers. Typically, eligibility extends for three (3) years from certification.

Temporary eligibility

The customer has a health condition or disability that temporarily prevents one from using the fixed-route service (can be either conditional or unconditional). (Example: An individual's condition may improve over time or may be aided by travel training.) This eligibility is usually valid for up to one (1) year from certification.

Application Request to Ride DART

Individuals who meet ADA criteria for paratransit service and are interested in applying for DART service through The COMET may request an application packet by contacting the following:

Existing DART customers will receive an application packet by mail approximately 60 days before their paratransit eligibility is due to expire.

A customer who desires the application in an alternate format such as large print, Braille, or electronic files can call DART at (803) 255-7123 for further assistance.

Online

www.catchTheCOMETsc.gov

Telephone

(803) 255-7123

Email

info@TheCOMETsc.gov

Postal Mail

DART Application Request
The COMET
3613 Lucius Road
Columbia, SC 29201



Customer Questionnaire

The customer must provide contact information such as home address, telephone number, emergency contact, etc. The application will be reviewed to ensure all information is completed for processing.

After the completion of the application process, an in-person functional assessment of transit related abilities will be scheduled within 3–12 calendar days by a contracted agency. The contracted

agency will provide The COMET with a written eligibility determination within 21 calendar days of receipt of a **completed** application, including an assessment. The COMET will review the recommendation and submit a final determination to the customer.

If the customer does not hear from The COMET within 21 calendar days following the functional assessment with the DART Eligibility Contractor, the customer will be granted

Presumptive Eligibility (temporary eligibility that will allow use of DART until a final determination has been made).

If the customer receives any level of eligibility below unconditional, the customer will have a right to appeal. Information on the Appeals Process will be sent to the customer during eligibility notification. The eligibility determination will be available to the customer in an accessible format.

Incomplete Applications

Incomplete applications may be the result of failing to appear for an in-person interview. If applications are incomplete, customers will be notified of the timeframe to complete in-person interviews. If customers do not complete the process, applications will be returned and customers will be required to reapply.

Inactive Applications

If an individual does not respond within 10 days of receiving a notification to attend a scheduled assessment and/or does not complete the in-person assessment within 30 days, the application may become inactive and the individual will be required to submit a new application when they are ready to restart the eligibility determination process.

Eligibility Appeals Process

The appeals process is available for any customer who wishes to dispute an eligibility determination. Customers are strongly encouraged to share additional information if any is available.

A customer may file an appeal of an eligibility determination within 60 calendar days from receipt of the decision. Two options are available for appealing. They are as follows:

- A customer can submit additional information for the Appeal Hearing Officer to consider if the decision is not to appear in person, or
- A customer can appeal in person and attend an Appeal Hearing on a mutually agreeable date and time with the Appeal Hearing Officer.

Additional information about the Appeals Process is located in Section 8.



Section 2: Travel Training

Travel Training

The COMET offers **free** travel training to individuals wishing to ride public buses to reach a variety of destinations. This approach is intended to educate individuals or groups on how to plan a trip, read bus schedules, purchase fares, use technologies, and board and alight the bus. Travel training is available to anyone within the service area who seeks assistance in learning how to use public transportation.

Individuals who use this service will be able to navigate confidently through the Midlands by using the fixed-route (big bus) or flexible transportation services. This service is not in conjunction with DART paratransit.

The COMET Travel Training Program offers various types of training services to meet the needs of participants:

- Trip Planning
- One-on-one Travel Training Instruction
- Group Travel Training Presentations

Individual Travel

Individual travel training sessions are conducted by The COMET's travel trainer who has experience working with individuals who have disabilities. There is no requirement to use the travel training service. Anyone who needs extra help figuring out how to Catch The COMET should feel welcome giving the agency a call for assistance.

Group Travel

Group travel training presentations can be arranged for agencies that provide services to individuals with disabilities, adults, and youths. Participants will learn of various services and programs offered by The COMET.



Signing Up

To sign up for travel training, contact The COMET at (803) 255-7130 or email at info@TheCOMETsc.gov



Section 3: Fares

Fare Information

The following chart outlines the rate schedule for DART services.

\$4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Base Fare• Companion Fare
Free	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children* (15 years of age or younger)• Personal Care Attendant (One)• Transfers (ReFlex to DART)• ¾ Mile Radius of Soda Cap Connector Routes 1, 2, 3, and 4
\$40	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 10-Ride Pass

*Must ride with fare-paying customer age 16 years old or older.

DART van operators will be unable to make change. Customers are encouraged to have exact fare ready prior to boarding the vehicle.



Section 4: Customer Rules

Rules of The Road

Customers are asked to follow these rules of conduct to ensure the safety and comfort of all customers and the van operator. This list is not all inclusive –



No smoking on board;



No riding under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs;



No abusive, threatening or obscene language or actions;



No discharge of bodily fluids or open wounds;



No fare evasion;



No physical abuse of another customer or the van operator;



No operating or tampering with any DART equipment while onboard a DART vehicle;



No radios, cassette tape players, compact disc players or other sound-generating equipment are to be played aboard the vehicles without headphones;



No children 10 and under are permitted to ride DART services unless accompanied by a fare paying passenger age 16 years of older for the duration of the trip.



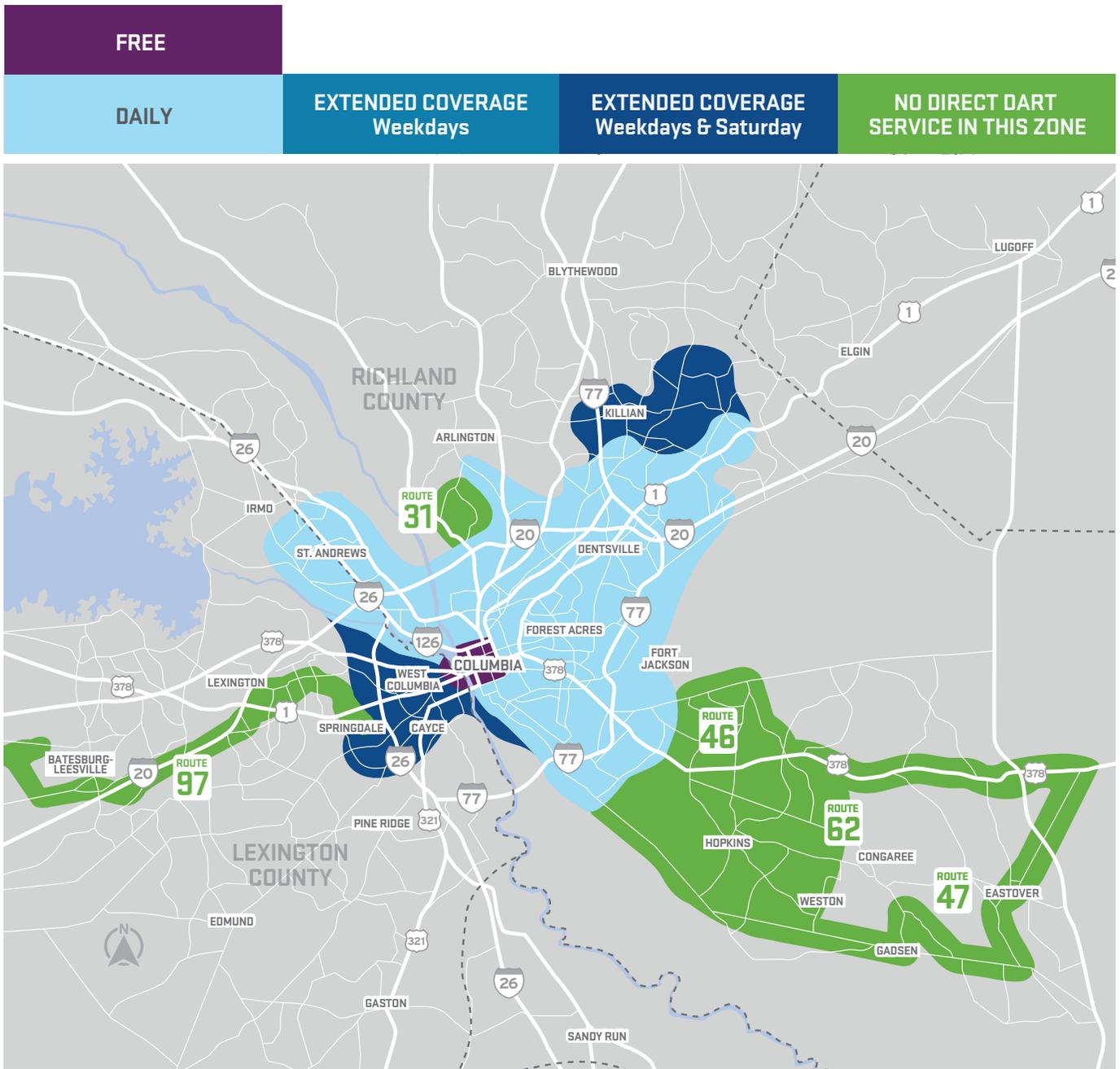
Personal hygiene must be maintained within acceptable standards. Strong odor, animal dander and other allergens may cause distress for other customers.

For safety reasons, customers are asked to limit unnecessary conversation with van operators when the vehicle is in motion.

Customers who violate the rules of conduct are subject to penalties up to and including suspension of service. Note: Customers who engage in physical abuse or cause physical injury to another customer or van operator may be subject to immediate and permanent suspension and possible criminal prosecution in accordance with SC Law Title 58 Chapter 23 Article 17.



Section 5: Service Area and Hours



Types of Service

DART provides complementary paratransit origin-to-designation service to eligible customers.

Service Area

The DART service area is comparable to the area served by the regular, fixed-route bus system and conforms to minimum requirements set by the ADA. DART customers can access the same areas as a person using the fixed-route bus system. The service area is a corridor which extends $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile around each fixed route. The areas for traveling can vary depending on the time of day and day of the week. Not all areas are available at all times.

The COMET also provides ReFlex routes within designated service areas. ReFlex routes are geographic zones where service is available on a call-ahead basis and the bus comes to a customer's door. ReFlex Routes are similar to ADA paratransit (DART) service but are open to anyone within the zone. There is a premium fare for ReFlex service. Customers are delivered either to destinations within the ReFlex zone or to a location where they can

transfer to fixed-route service or DART. Transfers from ReFlex to DART are free. If a customer is unsure if one's home or destination is within the current DART service area, assistance can be provided by calling (803) 255-7123 or TTY/TTD: 711 through Relay Service.



Service Days and Hours

The DART service days and times of service are based on the fixed-route bus system. DART customers can access the same areas on the same days and at the same times as a person using the fixed-route bus system. Remember, DART provides an equivalent level of service to The COMET's fixed route, not additional service.

Holiday Service (Subject to change.)

No Service is Provided	Saturday Service is Provided	Sunday Service is Provided
Thanksgiving Day	Day After Thanksgiving	New Year's Day
Christmas Day	Christmas Eve	Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day
	New Year's Eve	Presidents Day
		Memorial Day
		Independence Day
		Labor Day
		Veterans Day



Section 6: Trip Reservations

Scheduling the Trip

To request a trip, call the DART reservationist at (803) 255-7123. Trip reservations requested are accepted between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., Monday through Sunday and holidays. Trip requests may be made up to seven (7) days in advance. DART reservationists will make trip confirmations at the time of scheduling.

DART does not accept same day trip requests. When calling DART, your call will be answered in the order it is received. Please remain on hold for the next available reservationist. For quality assurance, all calls will be recorded.

Be prepared to provide this information to the reservationist in the following order:

1. Name

First and Last name

2. Date

What day will you be traveling?

3. Pick-up address

including numeric address, apartment and/or building name/number.

4. Time

What time would you like to be picked up and time you need to reach your destination?

5. Drop-off address

Physical address of your destination including specific drop-off info.

6. Contact Information

Telephone number at your destination.

7. PCA/Companion

Will a companion or PCA be traveling with you?

8. Mobility Device

Will you be using a mobility device?

Subscription Service

Subscription service is limited to customers traveling to the same place at the same time on reoccurring days (for example: every Monday, Wednesday, Friday at the same time, from the same origin, to the same destination). DART reserves the right to restrict subscription service to maintain a maximum level of 50% of available trips as required by the ADA, when there is no excess capacity available.

Pick-Up/Drop-Off Times

In compliance with ADA, DART will negotiate with customers for mutually agreed upon pick-up times that may be within one (1) hour before or one (1) hour after the requested time.

DART vehicles will arrive any time within a 30-minute ready window. This ready window starts 15 minutes before your scheduled pick-up and ends 15 minutes after the scheduled pick-up. For example, if the pick-up is scheduled for 9:00 a.m., the van will arrive any time between 8:45 a.m. and 9:15 a.m..

Customers are strongly encouraged to be ready to board the vehicle immediately upon arrival. The vehicle will leave after 5 minutes and the customer will be considered a No-Show. For example, if the pick-up is scheduled for 9:00 a.m. and the van arrives at 8:45 a.m., the customer must be prepared to board the vehicle by 8:50 a.m.

Pick-Up/Drop-Off Locations

Van operators are only authorized to pick up or drop off customers at the location for which the ride was scheduled. Van operators are unable to enter the rider's home. Customers must wait for their ride at the agreed upon location or risk a no-show occurrence. See the No-Show Policy section of this guide for more information.

If a customer cannot be left unattended (as a result of his or her disability or impairment), a companion or PCA is required to receive the customer upon arrival for drop off. In the event that a PCA or companion is not at the drop off location when the vehicle arrives, the passenger may be returned to the prior pick-up location.

Carry-On Packages

Carry-ons are limited to five (5) grocery bags or similar sized packages onboard DART vehicles. Van operators can help a customer carry three packages on and off the van from the same waiting area where the customer boards and alights the vehicle. Van operators are not allowed to carry any packages to the door. Packages should weigh no more than 25 pounds each.



Visitors

Out-of-town visitors who are ADA eligible can use DART services. If a visitor is unable to present documentation of eligibility from their home jurisdiction, he/she will be granted a 21-day presumptive eligibility with proof of non-residency in the Midlands of South Carolina. Please contact the DART reservation office at (803) 255-7123, Monday – Sunday for details.

PCAs

A personal care attendant (PCA) may accompany a registered DART customer at no additional charge if the customer's eligibility reflects the need. The PCA must travel to the same location as the DART customer and the DART customer must reserve space for the PCA when scheduling the trip.

Companions

A companion is welcome to travel with the DART customer for \$4.00 per one-way trip. Due to limited space, each DART customer must reserve space for a companion(s) when scheduling the trip. A companion must board and ride the vehicle at the customer origin and destination point.

Service Animals

A service animal is any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to work or perform tasks for an individual with a disability, including, but not limited to, guiding individuals with impaired vision, alerting individuals with impaired hearing to intruders or sounds, providing minimal protection or rescue work, pulling a wheelchair, or fetching dropped items.

Service animals are permitted on all of The COMET vehicles and are allowed to accompany a DART customer. A service animal must sit on the floor or on the DART customer's lap and may not occupy a customer seat. When scheduling a trip, please inform DART if a service animal will be utilized on a trip.

Trip Length

Travel time on DART is comparable to the amount of time it would take to make the same trip using fixed-route bus service with connections. The average trip length is about 60 minutes within Columbia, for instance, but a trip may exceed or fall below that average depending on the circumstances. The maximum trip length would be the same amount of time it would take a fixed-route customer to get from one point in the service area to another point in the service area, including a transfer. DART will check maps and routes to determine anticipated trip length for requested trips.

Arrival of Vehicle

DART van operators will wait for 5 minutes for a customer to board the vehicle. If a customer does not board the vehicle within the 5-minute wait time, the van operator will depart the location. DART is not required to call the customer when the vehicle arrives or before leaving the pick-up location. Customers are expected to be ready to board the vehicle upon its arrival.

When the vehicle arrives, the customer and/or companions are required to present the exact fare. The van operator will be unable to take the customer and/or companions to the requested destination without the required fare.

Late Vehicles

If the vehicle has not arrived by the end of the 30-minute ready window, please call the DART dispatch at (803) 255-7124. For example, you will need to call if your pick-up time is 9:00 a.m. and the van has not arrived by 9:15 a.m.



Section 7: No-Shows and Suspensions

No-Shows and Late Cancellations

The COMET has developed a policy and administrative process for addressing no-shows and late cancellations for DART service.

A “no-show” occurs when a DART customer:

- is not at the requested pick-up address, and the van operator is unable to locate the customer; or
- is not ready to board the vehicle within five (5) minutes of the vehicle’s arrival within the pick-up window; or
- has not called to cancel the trip a minimum of two (2) hours before the scheduled pick-up time.

No-shows cost DART and taxpayers thousands of dollars each year, and inconvenience other paratransit customers who participate in the shared-ride service. Continuous no-shows by the same customer can result in suspension of service.

If a customer has requested a trip and is unable to ride, it is his/her responsibility to cancel the scheduled trip. Trips missed by an individual for reasons beyond his/her control (including, but not limited to trips which are missed due to illness, doctor’s office canceling, death, hospitalization of an individual appointment with less than two-hour notification, family emergency, van operator error) shall not be the basis for determining that such a pattern or practice exists or grounds for sanctions.

No-Show Suspension Policy

DART may suspend for a reasonable period of time, customers who establish a pattern or practice of missing scheduled trips (no-shows). Trips missed by a customer for reasons beyond his or her control (including trips missed due to a transit agency error or lateness) will not be a basis for determining that a pattern or practice exists.

- Within a 30-day period, six (6) or more no-shows will be grounds for the suspension of service if the number of no-shows constitutes 10% or more of the customer’s completed trips. Only no-shows that are within the customer’s control will be counted toward the policy. All records will be reviewed thoroughly prior to suspension.
- For the first no-show within the 30-day period: DART will contact the customer by telephone to determine the reason for the no-show and emphasize the importance of notifying DART of changes in the travel schedule.
- For the second no-show within the 30-day period after the first occurrence: DART will notify the customer by mail of the time and date of the no-show and warn that any additional no-shows may result in suspension of service.
- For the third no-show within the 30-day period after the second occurrence: DART will review the customer’s travel record. If the no-shows constitute 10% or more of the customer’s completed trips, DART will



proceed to suspend its service for three days. If the no-shows do not constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips, DART will follow the procedure stated for the second no-show.

- For the fourth no-show within the 30-day period after the third occurrence: DART will review the customer's travel record. If the no-shows constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips DART will proceed to suspend its service for five days. If the no-shows do not constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips, DART will follow the procedure stated for the second no-show.
- For the fifth no-show within the 30-day period after the fourth occurrence: DART will review the customer's travel record. If the no-shows constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips DART will proceed to suspend its service for seven

days. If the no-shows do not constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips, DART will follow the procedure stated for the second no-show.

- For the sixth no-show within the 30-day period after the fifth occurrence: DART will review the customer's travel record. If the no-shows constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips DART will proceed to suspend its service for fourteen days. If the no-shows do not constitute 10% or more of the customer's completed trips, DART will follow the procedure stated for the second no-show.
- Loss of subscription service takes effect after the seventh and subsequent violations in a rolling 12-month period and will not be removed until the customer has three consecutive months without any no-shows or late cancellations.

The following chart provides a condensed outline of the violations noted above for customers who show a pattern and practice of no-shows.

Consequences for Pattern and Practice of No-Shows

VIOLATION	ACTION
1 st	Phone Call
2 nd	Written Warning
3 rd	3-day Suspension
4 th	5-Day Suspension
5 th	7-Day Suspension
6 th	14-Day Suspension
7 th and Subsequent	30-Days and/or loss of Subscription

Warning and Suspension Notifications

Suspensions will be preceded by a written notice of DART’s intent to suspend service. This notice, mailed by certified letter, will inform the customer of the basis for the suspension and provide notice of the right to appeal the suspension. All suspensions will be scheduled to begin at least 15 calendar days after receipt of the suspension to allow the customer an opportunity to present information relevant to the pending suspension.





Section 8: Appeals

Appeal Categories

An individual who will be defined as “customer” can appeal his/her ADA paratransit eligibility status or no-show suspension determination based on the categories below:

- Denial of eligibility for DART paratransit service;
- Disagreement with conditional or temporary eligibility for DART paratransit service;
- Suspension of DART paratransit service due to no-shows or incidents of violent or threatening behavior.

Requesting an Appeal

The customer may file an appeal in writing and provide information to The COMET using an Appeal Request Form. The form can be obtained by contacting the Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer via email at aprince@TheCOMETsc.gov or by telephone at 803-255-7129. Information on the form will consist of the following:

1. Name, mailing address, and daytime telephone number;
2. An option to submit additional information for review or choosing to appeal in person.

The request for an Appeal must be received by The COMET no later than close of business (4:30 p.m.) on the 60th calendar day after the date that the customer receives the decision being appealed. For purposes of this requirement, The COMET assumes that the customer will have received the decision no later than five calendar days after the date the decision was mailed to the customer’s address on record. The COMET mails all determination decisions via USPS first-class mail.

The 60-day appeal period begins to run on the sixth calendar day after the date the decision was mailed. For example, if the decision was mailed on June 1, the 60-day appeal period begins to run on June 6 and expires on August 4. The customer will timely mail a request for appeal by any of the following methods:

Postal Mail

The COMET Administrative Appeal Process
c/o Director of Regulatory Compliance/
Civil Rights Officer
3613 Lucius Road
Columbia, SC 29201

Email

aprince@TheCOMETsc.gov

Fax

(803) 255-7113

Requesting an Appeal (Continued)

Once a timely appeal is received, the Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer will review the information submitted to determine if the appeal may be resolved through an administrative review. If the appeal is resolved through administrative review to the satisfaction of the customer, the Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer will prepare a written notice of resolution and send it to the customer. If the customer disagrees with the notice of resolution, the customer has an additional 10 calendar days from the date the notice of resolution was mailed, including the date of mailing, to object. For purposes of this requirement, The COMET assumes that the customer will have received the notice of resolution no later than five calendar days after the date the decision was mailed to the customer's address on record. The 10-day objection period begins to run on the sixth calendar day after the date the resolution was mailed. The customer's objection must be delivered to The COMET and received by the tenth day in the same manner described above.

If the Appeal cannot be resolved through an administrative review, the Compliance and Civil Rights Officer will perform the following activities:

- Contact the customer to determine whether the customer requests a Hearing or not;

- If the customer requests a Hearing, coordinate a Hearing date and time with the customer and the Appeal Hearing Officer; and
- Notify the parties in writing.

If necessary, The COMET will arrange for the customer to receive DART

transportation to and from the place of Hearing at no charge. If a customer requests an Appeal due to a pattern of missing scheduled trips, paratransit service will continue to be provided to the customer until the Appeal is heard and decided.

Appeal Hearing Officer

The Director of Administration Operations/COO or designee for The COMET will be the individual serving as the Appeal Hearing Officer. This individual will be responsible for reviewing any Appeals regarding eligibility determination and suspension of DART service that cannot be resolved through the administrative review. All decisions reached by the Appeal Hearing Officer are final. If the customer disagrees with the decision, the customer can submit a new application if there have been significant changes in condition or new diagnosis or the customer may file an ADA complaint with the Office of Civil Rights of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

The documentation submitted to FTA should include a letter with as many details as possible to:

Director
FTA Office of Civil Rights
East Building-5th Floor, TCR
1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20590

Appeal with Hearing

The customer will present arguments and answer questions from the Appeal Hearing Officer regarding either the denial of eligibility or the suspension of ADA paratransit service. The customer may bring a second party or advocate who could represent or speak on his or her behalf. Lawyers are neither necessary nor required. The Hearing will be electronically recorded.

Appeal without Hearing

If the customer declines an in-person Appeal Hearing, the Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer will inform the customer of the date to submit written materials that the customer wishes the Appeal Hearing Officer to consider in determining the Appeal.

Following the submission date, the Appeal Hearing Officer will review the customer's file and written submissions, if any, and decide the matter.

Decision and Notification of Decision

The Appeal Hearing Officer may uphold or overturn the eligibility determination or the suspension, modify the eligibility determination, impose conditions upon eligibility, or take another appropriate action to decide the matter.

The Appeal Hearing Officer will provide a written determination to the Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer who will notify the customer of the decision and the reasons for the decision in writing. This activity will be handled no later than 30 calendar days after the date of the Appeal Hearing, including the date of the Hearing. Or, if the customer declined a Hearing, the Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer will notify the customer of the Appeal Hearing Officer's decision and the reasons for the decision in writing no later than 30 calendar days after the date the Appeal Hearing Officer reviewed and considered the matter. Written notification of the decision will be mailed via USPS certified mail.

If no decision is made on an appeal of eligibility determination within 30 days of the date of the Appeal Hearing or the Appeal Hearing Officer's consideration (inclusive of any time allowed for receipt of additional documents), the customer will be eligible for DART paratransit service as of the 31st day, until and unless an adverse decision is rendered by the Appeal Hearing Officer. The Director of Regulatory Compliance/Civil Rights Officer will immediately inform the customer that he/she is presumptively eligible for DART service first by telephone and then follow up with a written communication at the customer's last known address on record.



DART INFORMATION, RESERVATIONS & CANCELLATIONS

(803) 255-7123

DISPATCH

(803) 255-7124

CUSTOMER SERVICE

(803) 255-7100

FAX

(803) 255-7099